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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000286

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: ARAB LEAGUE INITIATIVE -- GROUNDHOG DAY?

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michele Sison for Reasons: Section 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa's Chief of Staff expressed neither optimism nor pessimism following his February 20-21 discussions with members of the majority and opposition. Acknowledging that the situation was difficult, and that Moussa had not yet decided whether he would return to Beirut, Youssef nevertheless said his visit had succeeded in framing a clear picture of all the issues. He warned his interlocutors that, if Moussa did return, it would be his last visit before the March 28 Arab League Summit. End summary.

GLASS HALF FULL -- OR HALF EMPTY?

12. (C) Charge Sison, accompanied by DCM and Pol/Econ Chief, met with Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa's Chief of Staff Hesham Youssef and Talal el-Amine on February 21. Youssef, who was returning to Cairo the following morning to meet up with SYG Amr Moussa, said his departure was "neither a good sign nor a bad sign." Rather, he and Moussa wanted to discuss the situation, which he admitted was "difficult," before deciding whether Moussa should return to Beirut on February 23 or February 24 to pursue his efforts to resolve the continuing impasse before the next scheduled parliamentary session on February 26.

AGREEMENT ON "HEADLINES"

13. (C) Youssef said the main objective of his visit was to address March 14's complaint that every time the majority made a concession, the opposition pocketed it and then made further demands. Youssef therefore met with representatives from the opposition as a group to identify all of their demands so that he would have a complete picture of the situation and there would be no more surprises. The opposition representatives were Hussein Khalil (Hizballah), Ali Hassan Khalil (Amal), Gebran Bassil (representing Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement) and Osama Saad (representing former PM Omar Karami). From the majority's side, Youssef met with

Amine Gemayel (Phalange) and Information Minister Ghazi Aridi (representing Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party). Youssef also met with Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman and spoke with majority leader Saad Hariri by phone.

14. (C) As a result of these discussions, Youssef had been able to identify six points that needed to be addressed, under the "headlines" of 1) the Presidency; 2) the electoral law; 3) government formation; 4) agreement that the government would remain until the 2009 parliamentary elections; 5) agreement that there would be consensus-building on majority decisions; and 6) agreement on the government program (including the Ministerial Declaration to parliament). The last three points were "understandings" that would be put in writing and made public. Youssef said he had asked "in no uncertain terms" whether this was the definitive list of issues, and all parties confirmed that it was.

15. (C) The majority's main concern, Youssef said, was the opposition's attempts to put conditions on the choice of the next prime minister and cabinet portfolios. Youssef confirmed that these were not part of the "package" deal the Arab League is trying to put together. It would be up to the president and the prime minister to allocate portfolios, including those of the four "sovereign" ministries (Foreign Affairs, Finance, Interior, Defense).

16. (C) Youssef claimed there was no unified position within the opposition on the prime minister, but a majority within the opposition had no problem with either Fouad Siniora or Saad Hariri. Youssef agreed that this was one sign the opposition was decreasing its demands, since it was no longer insisting (not even the Aoun camp) on certain characteristics for the prime minister. El-Amine commented, however, that Siniora had no chance, but there was no problem with Saad.

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17. (C) Youssef reaffirmed that neither the majority nor the opposition had proposed the 10/10/10 formula; instead, each side was starting from its own position (14/5/11 in Aoun's case, 15/5/10 in the majority's) and pointing to 10/10/10 as a compromise.

SLEIMAN STAYS ON THE SIDELINE

18. (C) Youssef said Michel Sleiman, as the consensus presidential candidate, was not weighing in on any of these issues, rightly so, as any decision now would be at his own expense by undermining his decision-making role once he is elected president. On the cabinet, he reportedly told Youssef he would accept whatever was decided in terms of the number of seats allocated to each side; however, in naming ministers he insisted that "what is mine is mine" and he would not bargain with either the majority or opposition on the names.

LAST CHANCE BEFORE DAMASCUS

19. (C) Youssef said he had let both sides know that, if SYG Moussa returned, it would be his last visit before the March 28 Arab League Summit in Damascus, as he and his staff would be busy preparing for the summit. This was to pressure the parties to come to an agreement, he said, although he admitted privately that there might be a possibility for a return visit. He also noted that Arab League foreign ministers, including Tareq Mitri from Lebanon, were scheduled to meet March 5-6 in Cairo, in preparation for the Summit.

FLURRY OF ARAB DIPLOMATIC ACTIVITY

¶10. (C) Youssef commented that there had been a lot of diplomatic activity in recent days on the part of Arab League members. He attributed this to the upcoming summit and a feeling that the time had come to find a solution. Syria had extended invitations to the summit to some, but not all, members, and not yet to Lebanon. From a legal point of view, Youssef stressed, member states had no discretion in which countries to invite. Interestingly, Syria had set February 26 -- the date of Lebanon's next scheduled parliamentary session -- as its deadline for sending out invitations. Youssef dismissed fears that, should the Arab League initiative fail, Lebanon's political deadlock would be "internationalized," asking, how much more international can it get?

PROMOTING ELECTORAL REFORM IN THE ARAB WORLD

¶11. (U) Charge Sison asked whether the Arab League was involved in any initiatives to promote electoral reform in London. Youssef said that, while the Arab League had no mechanism for cooperation on this issue, it did provide experts when asked, i.e., for the Palestinian constitution. He also mentioned a Swedish NGO entitled "Idea" that was working to promote electoral reform in the Arab world generally, adding that in April the heads of all the regional electoral bodies would meet in Cairo.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) While it is encouraging that Youssef seems to have been able to put all of the issues clearly on the table, the devil, as always, is in the details. Pol/Econ Chief held separate meetings with Nader Hariri (Saad's advisor) and Ali Hamdan (Berri's advisor), which indicated just how much work Moussa still has in front of him. While Hamdan glossed over the details, arguing that if the majority accepted 10/10/10, a general "political agreement" on the remaining points was all that was necessary, Nader's opinion was that the two sides were farther apart than ever. Youssef himself called the rounds of Moussa visits to Lebanon a "rollercoaster of optimism followed by pessimism" that often felt like a "never-ending nightmare." To those of us watching the situation day by day, we find the Charge's comparison to the film "Groundhog Day" quite apt. End comment.

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